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Thomas Hart Benton, 1954 exhibiti



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# THOMAS HART BENTON



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## FORWARD

IN THE final analysis, the test of an artist's importance, and indeed of his longevity, is the survival of his work after the tide of public favor that first carried him into prominence has receded, and other men of opposite inclinations have taken over the galleries and exhibition rooms, not to mention the illustrated magazines. During the intervening years, from the sensational attention accorded him as leader of a movement loosely called Regionalism—the changing years in which the concern of artists with American themes was overborne by artists with no interest in anything save imponderable effusions to the present time—Thomas Hart Benton has held his own, adding to his fame, which is as solid as bricks, without the assistance of promotional artifices of any kind.

Today Benton stands, as Thackeray said of Dickens, "at the top of the tribe," in defiance of the corruption of pictorial taste and the organized efforts of mercenaries and disgruntled dabblers to unhorse him. He rises above the ruck of bloodless contraptionists with monolithic authority; and more than that, he continues to produce unceasingly and always with freshening interests and the creator's impulsion to explore new pastures and new methods.

The present exhibition takes us back some thirty years and includes characteristic examples of Benton's achievements in mural decoration and easel pictures. And it brings out into the open the controversial paintings long interred in the Whitney Museum, and almost forgotten because inaccessible. For the acquisition of these murals the staff of the New Britain Museum is to be congratulated. Mr. Sanford Low and his associates seized upon art treasures beyond price while the New York curators dawdled, lazily confessing they had no room for masterpieces—that is, for American masterpieces.

In its popular or immediate appeal, as a vehicle of social communication, Benton's art is a representation of American life, a dramatic and highly individualized rendering of the behavior of common people. It is thus related to folk expression, to an art proceeding from and affecting the lives of men and women. By congenital predisposition and with extraordinary energy, Benton has observed the diversities of American life at first-hand from the industrial centers to the backwoods and Western plains; and in the course of his career has accumulated a veritable library of drawings done on the spot. The finished paintings, which are evolved from the drawings and miniature sculptures in clay, are the productions of an architectural planner, a composer whose structural apparatus is derived from the Renaissance masters.

The murals now on display are the most distinguished wall decorations in America. They bring together in almost perfect harmony the two elements of picture-making, subject-matter and procedure—the things to be painted and the way in which they realized in pigment. In them we behold the transformation of subject-matter directly observed and assimilated—and as earthy as Dutch genre—into a scheme of relationships as complicated as the designs of Rubens; we behold sculpturesque figures in deep space, dramatic renderings in vivid colors and with the sharpest contrasts of lights and darks to embody the impact of life experiences on technical habits.

It hardly needs to be pointed out that Benton has no patience with the old—and new—fallacy that mural decorations should preserve the illusion of flat surfaces and shrink back into innocuous patterns like so much wallpaper. There is no difference emotionally or technically between his wall jobs and his easel pictures except in size. Both are dynamic reconstructions of American life; both are profoundly planned and delivered in a style familiar to everyone. The murals demand a more elaborate scheme of presentation—a sort of courtesy to the spectator lest he break his neck trying to grasp a multiplicity of divisions from a single line of vision.

In sum and in plain language, Benton's paintings fulfill the fundamental purpose of all enduring art. They are remarkable not only as forms but in what they represent, conveying emotions aroused by the contemplation of subjects scrupulously studied and uniquely endowed with the artist's own style and temperament—the stuff of human life as old as time and part and parcel of man's environment, the things that move and exalt and disturb him, that prompt him to live and strive and wonder. It is not a precious art nor a pretty one. It has its verbal analogue in the art of Mark Twain who made war on the esthetic shams of his profession but never forgot the exacting nature of his craft in his development into the foremost literary artist of America.

For it should be remembered that a painter, however profound in psychological insight or intellectual equipment, to be a significant artist, must have the talent demanded by his calling—the enhancing magic, the creative touch Leonardo talked about. Benton is a born artist: as a draftsman, one of the best of modern times; as a designer in a class by himself; and when he feels like it, capable of the utmost subtleties and refinements of color and texture.

Thomas Craven

The Arts of Life in America

Mural No. 1. INDIAN ARTS — (1932)

Dancing, Chasing the "Great Spirit," Basket Weaving,  
Preparation of Skins, Hunting



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The Arts of Life in America

Mural No. 2. ARTS OF THE WEST — (1932)

Getting the Wild Ones (Broncho Busting), Poker, Shooting,  
Horse-shoe Pitching, "Swing 'em Round and Come Down the Middle"  
(Home Town Orchestra and Dancing)

ART MUSEUM OF THE  
NEW BRITAIN INSTITUTE



### The Arts of Life in America

#### Mural No. 3. ARTS OF THE CITY — (1932)

Face Painting, The Comic Strips, Jazz and the Dance,  
Love and War, Radio, Prohibition-Booze Politics-Business,  
"Shake 'em Baby," Love and Gin, Beauty and the Prize,  
"None Shall Go Hungry"

ART MUSEUM OF THE  
NEW BRITAIN INSTITUTE



The Arts of Life in America

Mural No. 4. ARTS OF THE SOUTH — (1932)

Salvation and Ecstasy (Holy Rollers), Negro Singing, Craps,  
Feeding the Baby, Mule Driving, The Sabbath Call

ART MUSEUM OF THE  
NEW BRITAIN INSTITUTE



No. 1 "ROASTING EARS" — (1938-39)

LOANED BY THE METROPOLITAN  
MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS  
NEW YORK CITY



No. 2 "STILL LIFE" — (1944)

LOANED BY THE ASSOCIATED AMERICAN ARTISTS  
NEW YORK CITY

No. 3 "SUSANNA AND THE ELDERS" — (1938)



LOANED BY THE CALIFORNIA PALACE  
OF THE LEGION OF HONOR  
SAN FRANCISCO, CALIFORNIA



No. 4 "PRODIGAL SON" — (1943)

LOANED BY THE DALLAS MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS  
DALLAS, TEXAS



No. 5 "HAILSTORM" — (1940)

LOANED BY THE JOSLYN ART MUSEUM  
OMAHA, NEBRASKA



No. 6 "THE NEGRO SOLDIER" — (1942)

LOANED BY THE STATE HISTORICAL  
SOCIETY OF MISSOURI  
COLUMBIA, MISSOURI



No. 7 "THE DOCTOR" — (1952)

LOANED BY EDWIN HENRY SCHORER, M.D.  
KANSAS CITY, MISSOURI



No. 8 "THRESHING WHEAT" — (1939)

LOANED BY THE SHELDON SWOPE ART GALLERY  
TERRE HAUTE, INDIANA



No. 9 "DOWN ON THE FARM—RICE HARVEST" — (1947)

LOANED BY THE NATIONAL CITY BANK  
OF NEW YORK  
NEW YORK CITY



No. 10 "FLUID CATALYTIC CRACKERS" — (1945)

LOANED BY THE MASSACHUSETTS  
INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY  
CAMBRIDGE, MASSACHUSETTS



No. 11 "NEW ENGLAND EDITOR" — (1946)

LOANED BY THE MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS  
BOSTON, MASSACHUSETTS



No. 12 "PEACE AT LAST" — (1952)

LOANED BY MR. ALFRED HYDEMAN  
YORK, PENNSYLVANIA

No. 13 "KING PHILLIP" — (1922)



LOANED BY THE SAINT JOSEPH COLLEGE  
WEST HARTFORD, CONNECTICUT



No. 14 "THE NEW PONY" — (1950)

LOANED BY MR. HOWARD CAMPBELL  
YORK, PENNSYLVANIA



No. 15 "CUSTER'S LAST STAND" — (1943)

LOANED BY MR. RICHARD A. RUSSEL  
SCARSDALE, NEW YORK



No. 16 "WRECK OF THE OLD '97" — (1940-43)

LOANED BY THE PEOPLES BOOK CLUB, INC.  
AN AFFILIATE OF SEARS, ROEBUCK & CO.  
CHICAGO, ILLINOIS



No. 17 "THE BOY" — (1950)

LOANED BY MR. ALFRED HYDEMAN  
YORK, PENNSYLVANIA



No. 18 "LOUISIANA RICE FIELDS" — (1928)

LOANED BY THE BROOKLYN MUSEUM  
BROOKLYN, NEW YORK



No. 19 "COTTON LOADING, RED RIVER LANDING"—(1928)

LOANED BY MR. THOMAS BENTON  
KANSAS CITY, MISSOURI



No. 20 "SOURWOOD MOUNTAIN" — (1927)

LOANED BY MR. HYMAN COHEN  
NEW YORK CITY

No. 21 "BUTTERFLY CHASER" — (1952)



LOANED BY MR. THOMAS BENTON  
KANSAS CITY, MISSOURI



No. 22 "TEEN-AGERS" — (1953)

LOANED BY MR. THOMAS BENTON  
KANSAS CITY, MISSOURI



No. 23 "PORTRAIT OF DENYS WORTMAN" — (1953)

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No. 24 "PREPARING THE BILL" — (1934)

LOANED BY MR. THOMAS BENTON  
KANSAS CITY, MISSOURI

No. 25 "AARON" — (1945)



LOANED BY THE PENNSYLVANIA ACADEMY  
OF FINE ARTS  
PHILADELPHIA, PENNSYLVANIA

The Thomas Hart Benton murals were made available to this Museum through the foresight and generosity of the late Mr. Alix W. Stanley, whose patronage and interest in the development of this institution has added so much to the importance and prestige of our American collection.

Among the many important gifts of paintings, these outstanding Benton murals, his last contribution to this Museum, will always be a monumental tribute to his remarkable interest in the cultural progress of this community.

We are also greatly indebted to the many Museums and private collectors from coast to coast, who have so generously and graciously contributed to the success of this Thomas Hart Benton retrospective Exhibition.

SANFORD LOW, *Director*

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